Stop and Smell the Roses

By Ella Moss

That day, the sun was bright and climbing, the sky sustaining a brilliant blue. Petals were blossoming in dazzling colors and trees swayed gently in the breeze. The clouds moved overhead lazily, shifting and creating shapes for the children in town to laugh and point at. The children, who were groggily rising from their sleep, shaking off dreams, and beginning a new day. That day they would wrestle in the town square, maybe kick around a football. And upon getting tired, argue which movie to see at the cinema. Their benevolent parents would go about their break much the same, relaxing and relishing in the limited days of the sunny season. That day was a regular Saturday for these amiable people. People who despite their obvious pleasantness had buried issues, as everyone does; quite a deal of bothersome affairs. Yet on that day, they willed themselves to relieve those problems until the new week, and give themselves a holiday. But that day, it wasn’t meant to be that these people would rest, because something else much more calamitous was at stake.

Fields rolling in shades of viridian were growing that year’s harvest and the flora was radiant in contrast. A narrow dirt road, hedged by a crumbling stone wall and various foliage, snaked through the tree line, linking distant residents to the modest town. Harry Banks was one of those far-off neighbors, and now, he was making his way down the brown-stained lane, humming a little tune. Harry was an honest boy who liked to make his parents proud. He was on his way to a movie date with a certain Evelyn Reed, when a particularly large bramble caught his eye. It was adorned with beautiful red efflorescence: roses, and smelled positively beguiling. Harry peered down at the flowers, transfixed with the want of presenting one to Evelyn, in fact, he wanted to give her a bouquet of the aromatic things. So, he daintily reached for one of the stems, and pulled. He managed to break the petiole, but not without compensation. Harry felt a sharp sting on his third finger and realized very quickly that he had drawn blood. A puny cut wasn’t going to discourage valiant Harry though, and so he began pulling more and more of the flowers, albeit more carefully, until he had a small bouquet. Happy with his pickings, Harry continued on into town.

He met Evelyn at the doors to the theater. They greeted each other politely and Harry bestowed his roses. Evelyn was thrilled and smiled splendidly at him. She was a very pretty girl and Harry was immediately enamored by her, but as she took the flowers, she gasped, looking down at her hands. She had also cut herself on the briery, and Harry instantly flushed, contrite with himself for not having thought to remove the prickly thorns prior. Evelyn was understanding, and reassured him that she thought nothing of it. They went inside to watch the film and enjoyed a charming date. The finale was grandiose, even Harry was tearing up a bit, and so when an older woman, noticeably emotional, stepped out in front of the pair on the way to the exit, Evelyn stopped her and gave her a rose. Harry was smitten.

Later that night, Harry was at home. He had reluctantly bid goodbye to Evelyn after they indulged in two sweltering ice-creams in the summer heat, and now he was getting ready for bed. He was brushing his teeth when he felt an inconspicuous twitch in his third finger. Harry had bandaged the places on his hand where the roses had gashed him, but now, all of a sudden, he found the area to be unbearably itchy. He dropped his tooth brush and ripped off the bandages and sure enough, a ferocious red rash was spreading all over his fist. Harry panicked and dashed to alert his mother. The rest of the night he only worsened; the grooves of his cuts swelled into welts and the rash spread to the rest of his body. The next day he was too sick to get out of bed. He developed a fever and blisters began to form along his arms and legs, and as the day went on, the blisters only festered until poor Harry was garnished in brilliant red, like a freshly budding rose.

Soon after, Mrs. Banks fell ill. Unable to care for Harry anymore, she called into town to request the physician. On the phone, the doctor sounded astonishingly harrowed as he guiltily apologized and explained how a similar thing had happened to a Miss Evelyn Reed. The disease had spread and he was unable to undertake any extended visits, and as they were out of town he simply could not manage it. Harry’s father was a distant man, always had been, but at this time, he decided to go into town to see for himself the pandemonium underfoot. He returned by the end of the night with news. The physician was right, Harry’s sickness had infected countless people all over the small community, and the disease was believed to be spread by touch and was uncommonly efficient. No one knew what had started it, however, there was an especially discernible outbreak near the library. Florence Dean, the illustrious librarian, was a renowned weepy old woman who upon arrival of her condominium was stricken with cold chills and violent shakes. She was said to have dropped a bright red flower and then promptly collapsed by the front door. An ignorant passerby had found her and frantically called for help, attracting the attention of a large crowd, all of whom were quickly contaminated. Mr. Banks had imposed upon the physician, who he found had abandoned assistance in a moment of vulnerability. At a loss, the doctor offered him his only advice; if a person was lucky enough to have evaded the disease, they should stay in their homes and isolate themselves, for there is no known cure.

By this time, news had spread to several of the sequestered citizenry, who were a part of the minority who had not contracted the vicious infection, and some of the only people who were well enough to do anything about it. Angered and frightened, the group, including Mr. Banks, marched to the center of town where the Mayor’s office was stationed. Their beloved community, who just a few days prior had been bustling with energy and prosperity, was now a ghost town. The streets were barren and a dreary cloak had been draped around the city’s shoulders, swathing the environment in shadow. It was no secret that their elected officials had been conspicuously quiet since the outbreak, and Mr. Banks’ company existed to demand they be given a sense of direction and order. However, the bureau continued to be reticent. After no response to the bellowing from the small mob that had gathered outside the edifice, the band commenced their attack, blinded by rage and desperation, and demolished everything in order to get inside. Once within, Mr. Banks’ realized what might’ve been clear to a less credulous society. They explored, dubious, until the eventual acceptance hollowed their hearts. The Mayor’s office was abandoned, and there was no foreseeable trajectory.

The doleful bunch faced no other choice but to return home to their afflicted families. Mr. Banks tended to Harry and his wife laboriously until he, in time, became sickly too, and their only choice was to wait for quietus. There was a weight hanging over the once jubilant town, sheathing it in a blanket of grief and horror. That day was a reckoning for the righteous little community. They never could have predicted something so mercilessly cruel happening to such a simple and blameless place. Or that something so horrid could come from something so beautiful. That day was the shift into a new season, the first time the temperature dropped. A quiet hush enveloped the now faded malachite fields, and the sky lost a bit of its saturation. That day they were forced to stop taking their lives for granted, and exposed, for the first time, to life’s harsh realities. Harry knew then how imminent it was to stop and smell the roses.